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ABSTRACT

The accountability program of North Carolina's 67 alternative schools was studied after its first year of implementation. North Carolina State Board of Education adopted a policy requiring alternative schools to participate in its ABCs Accountability Program during the 1999-2000 school year. The ABCs program is based on Accountability, Basics, and increased local Control. Alternative schools are public schools offering an alternative, nontraditional, program of instruction for students whose needs cannot be met in a regular school, even with special education programs. In North Carolina, alternative schools are hospital schools, special education schools, or vocational education schools. The accountability plan for each alternative school has six components: three based on state test scores and three based on local indicators in each school's improvement plan. The local superintendent and board of education must approve the Accountability Plan for each alternative school. The alternative schools qualify for recognition levels based on a specified rewards and sanctions schedule. In this first year, a total of 35 different indicators were used by alternative schools as local objective measures of accountability. A comparison of alternative school and regular K-12 school performance in North Carolina shows that alternative schools made the "Expected Growth" goal at almost twice the rate of the regular schools and had fewer schools receiving "no recognition." This may be an artifact of the way that alternative schools qualify for various levels of recognition. It is possible that a school could fail to meet any of the achievement levels based on the ABC program, but because it achieved the local objectives, it could reach the "expected" level of recognition. The results do suggest that it is possible to construct an accountability paradigm for nonstandard or alternative schools that will tap into their uniqueness and yet set an achievement standard as well. (SLD)

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Accountability Policy

for North Carolina's Alternative Schools,

Year One, Results

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Background

North Carolina's General Assembly, during the last five years, has instituted a comprehensive, aligned, and interrelated state-level accountability program consisting of:

- Content and student achievement standards
- Testing
- Professional development
- Accountability reporting
- Rewards, sanctions, and targeted assistance.

Referred to as the ABCs Accountability Program, local schools are given increased local Control (the "C" in the ABCs), in return for increased Accountability (the "A" in the ABCs) and a focus on the Basics of reading, mathematics, and writing (the "B" in the ABCs). The ABCs Plus is the state's Strategic Plan for Excellent Schools it includes five priorities:

- High Student Performance;
- Safe, Orderly and Caring Schools;
- Quality Teachers, Administrators, and Staff;
- Strong Family, Community and Business Support; and
- Effective and Efficient Operations.

In order for student achievement to improve, the state's role of developing standards and accountability programs had to be balanced with local control over teaching methods and allocation of resources. Two important factors were examined and publicly reported for each school: whether or not "expected achievement growth" is attained for the same students from one year to the next and "absolute performance" in terms of the percent of students scoring at or above grade level on state tests. Content standards define what students should learn from grade level to grade level and student achievement standards define how well students should learn it.

This year, as the state rolls out its Student Accountability Standards, which will be used in making decisions about student promotions, a priority for the NC State Board of Education is the Initiative referred to as Closing the Gap… in achievement between white and minority (African American, Hispanic, and Native American students).

A part of this initiative is the identification of students at risk of school failure and the development of appropriate prevention and early intervention programs to help these students succeed. Alternative schools and programs are an important part of the intervention system.

Definitions

In the 1999 Session of the North Carolina General Assembly, legislation was passed requiring each local school district to have at least one alternative school or program by July 2000. The State Board of Education adopted a policy requiring alternative schools to participate in the ABCs Accountability Program during the 1999-2000 academic years.

An alternative schools in North Carolina is a public school that offers an Alternative Program of instruction within a traditional calendar that:

- Addresses the needs of students which typically cannot be met in a regular school, even with special education programs,
- Provides nontraditional education curriculum and instruction,
- Serves as an adjunct to a regular school or is independently organized, and
- Falls outside of the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education.
- Provides instruction during regular school hours or on a variety of flexible schedules and/or provide an extended day component.

There are three types of Special schools within the alternative schools classification in North Carolina, they are:

Hospital School - A public school that offers instructional services to students admitted to a hospital for treatment. Students can be from any location in the state and normally have various lengths of stay.

Special Education School - A public school that offers a Special Program of instruction within a traditional calendar that focuses primarily on special education, including instruction for any of the following:

- Hard of hearing
- Deaf
- Speech
- Impaired
- Orthopaedically impaired
- Mentally retarded
- Seriously emotionally disturbed
- Multi-handicapped
- Visually handicapped
- Deaf and blind
- Adapts curriculum, materials, or instruction to meet the needs of students served.

Vocational Education School - A public school that offers a Vocational Program of instruction within a traditional calendar that:

- Focuses primarily on vocational education
- Provides education and training in one or more semi-skilled or technical occupations

Definition of Awards and Recognition Categories

In the ABCs Accountability Program, schools are classified into several categories for the purpose of awarding incentives and recognition. The award or recognition a school receives is determined in most cases by the school's attainment as reflected in the growth/gain composites (expected and exemplary) and the performance composite.

Regular schools are eligible, if certain criteria are met, to be designated a Schools of Excellence, a School of Distinction, or one of the 25/10 Most Improved Schools in Academic Growth/Gain. Alternative schools are not eligible for these awards. They are, however, eligible as Schools Making Exemplary Growth / Gain or Schools Making Expected Growth/Gain. These designations carry certain financial incentives. They may also be designated as a No Recognition or Low-Performing school.

The classification and incentive levels for schools participating in the ABCs are:

Schools Making Exemplary Growth/Gain: These schools attained their exemplary growth/gain standard. They will receive certificate and incentive awards. Incentive awards are $1500 per person for certified staff and $500 per person for teacher assistants. Alternative schools must meet 6/6 or 5/6 indicators for this designation.

Schools Making Expected Growth/Gain: These schools attained their expected growth/gain standard (but not their exemplary growth/gain standard). They will receive a certificate of recognition and financial awards. Incentive awards are $750 per person for certified staff and $375 per person for teacher assistants. Alternative schools must meet 4/6 or 3/6 indicators for this designation.

Schools with No Recognition: These schools did not make their expected growth/gain standards; but they have at least half their students scoring at or above Achievement Level III as measured by the performance composite. Alternative schools that meet 2/6 indicators fall into this category.

Low-Performing Schools: Low-Performing Schools are those that fail to meet their expected growth/gain standard and have significantly less than 50% of their students performing at or above Achievement Level III. Alternative schools that meet 1/6 or below fall into this category.

Special Schools (These schools will not be subject to low-performing status). Include…Special Education Schools (those exclusively serving students with disabilities who are not following the Standard Course of Study and who are not tested); Career Centers and Vocational Schools, and Hospital Schools will follow the feeder pattern.

The State Board of Education adopted a policy requiring alternative schools to participate in the ABCs Accountability Program during the 1999-2000 academic year. Each alternative school's Accountability plan has six components: three based on state test scores and three based on local indicators in each school's improvement plan.

Three-mandated achievement based components apply to alternative schools that contain any high school grades. For Alternative schools that contain only grade eight or below the results of the End of Grade, EOG, tests will count as the three components.

1. End of Course, EOC, results (Algebra I, English I and II, Biology, US history, and ELPS) Include EOG scores for grades eight and below,

2. NC High School Comprehensive Test Results, and

3. change in Competency Passing Rate (from end of 8th Grade to end of 10th Grade.

The local superintendent and board of education must approve the Accountability Plan for each alternative school. Alternative schools will qualify for recognition levels based on the rewards and sanctions schedule in Figure .1

Met Criterion	Recognition Level Analogous to:
5/6 or 6/6	Exemplary
3/6 or 4/6	Expected
2/6	No Recognition
1/6	Low Performing

Figure 1.Schedule of Alternative School ABCs recognition criteria

State and Local Accountability Indicators

North Carolina had 67 alternative schools in 1999-2000. These schools had different configurations of grade levels (mainly, 6-8, 6-12, 9-12, and K-12). Therefore, the three achievement indicators are based on the state tests administered at those grade levels. Students in the middle grades take End-of-Grade tests, while high school students take End-of-Course tests. Some of the challenges for alternative schools do not exist in most regular schools.

The three achievement test indicators are based on the test results for the students who are enrolled and attend school during the times the tests are administered. Schools are required to test at least 95% of students. Some students enrolled in alternative schools early in the year return to their regular schools and are tested there. Students who dropped out are, of course, not counted in the test scores, unless they drop out after test administration.

End-of-grade tests require a minimum of 15 student scores and a minimum of 30 student scores for end-of-course tests, in order to produce a reliable and valid measure of accountability. For many of these alternative schools, student enrollment is like a revolving door and attendance is a key barrier, often the main reason students were referred there to begin with.

In an attempt to be fair to alternative schools, for accountability purposes, if fewer that 15 students take the end-of-grade tests, and the school attains it's growth and performance goals based on those results, the school is given credit. However, if the minimum number of students is not tested and the alternative school does not meet its growth and performance goals, the school is held harmless for those indicators.

Alternative schools are most often designed to be small along with small class size to provide a more personalized, individualized education. By nature of the school design, there are concentrations of students who are having trouble in school, often doing poorly on achievement tests and other measures of school success.

School districts were encouraged to customize the development of their alternative schools based on the unique needs and strengths of the students who enroll there. The alternative school's three local accountability indicators usually reflect local option goals such as increased attendance, graduation rates, and parent involvement. Examples of some of the type of goals chosen are listed in Figure 2.

Local Option	Baseline	Results
By the end of the school year, we will have had a number of parent conferences, as measured by the parent conference log, to equal two for at least 50% of our total enrollment for the year.	>=50%	54.3%
At least fifty percent of the individual students who remain in the program for 30 days or more will maintain a 90% rate of attendance.	33.3	21.0
The average daily attendance will exceed 60% of students in membership.	60%	66.73
Reduce the percentage of W-2 dropouts by 4% from a 1998-99 baseline of 34%.	34.0%	Percentage of dropouts for 1999-2000 was 22.8%
The school will sponsor at least five activities involving students with local Human Service Agencies per semester.	5/semester	Sponsored 9 - 1st Semester and Sponsored 28 - 2nd Semester
The number of students who improve their GPA in course work for the 1999-2000 year will be 80%.	80%	98% of students improved their GPA in 1999-2000.
Students will be tracked for improvement in Grade Point Average here by comparing the student's GPA upon arrival to their GPA upon return to the student's base school.	50%	17 of 31 students showed improved GPA's.

Figure 2. Examples of Alternative School local option objectives.

Surprisingly some alternative schools had difficulty in defining three options that they were going to use to measure their schools performance. Typically reported problems were, nothing to measure, combining two goals into one, not providing information on how the objective/goal was to be measured, and not being able to define a baseline.

A total of 35 different indicators were used by alternative schools as local objective measures of accountability. The top eight for 1999 2000 school year ranked in descending order, include the following: increased parental involvement, increased attendance, improved grade point averages, improved safety (tied for third place), reduced suspensions, improved customer satisfaction, reduced dropouts.

Although not all Alternative Schools have provided this year's data regarding their goal, selection based on a reduced set of responses shifts in the relative importance of certain goals/objectives can be noted in Table 1. Whether this indicates institutional, growth or goal positioning cannot be determined at this time.

Table 1

Most Frequently Chosen Local Option

Local Option	Rank in 1999-2000	Rank in 2000-2001
Parental Involvement	1	1
Improve Attendance	2	2
Reduce Suspension	3	4
Improve Safety	4	8
Improve GPA	5	6
Improve Customer Satisfaction	6	9
Reduce Dropout	7	15
Community Involvement	8	5

Although different alternative schools may use the same category of indicator (e.g., customer satisfaction), they may define and measure the indicator differently. In addition, some indicators have a more obvious link to improving achievement than others (e.g., improving school attendance) improve.

A comparison of Alternative School and regular K-12 schools performance in the North Carolina ABCs shows that Alternative Schools made Expected Growth at almost twice the rate of the regular schools and had fewer schools receiving No Recognition. This may be an artifact of the way that alternative schools qualify for various levels of recognition. It is quite possible that a school can fail to reach any of the achievement levels based on the ABCs but because they reached all of their local objectives the school will reach the Expected level of recogonition.

Table 2

1999-2000 ABCs Results

	K-12 Schools		Alternative Schools		Total	
Award or Recognition Category	Number of Schools	Percent	Number of Schools	Percent	Number of Schools	Percent
Schools Making Exemplary Growth/Gain	935	45.7	21	31.3	956	45.2
Schools Making Expected (not Exemplary) Growth/Gain	482	23.5	38	56.7	520	24.6
Schools Receiving No Recognition	589	28.8	6	9.0	595	28.1
Low-performing Schools	42	2.1	2	3.0	44	2.1
Total ABCs Schools	2,048		67		2,115	

Alternative school performance in the ABCs was considered somewhat problematic in that the schools had to meet more requirements, six, in the ABCs then they had in the past. Most alternative schools met the goals set in their local options with fewer meeting the requirements of the achievement part of their formula, Figure 3.

	Number	Number Met	Percent
Local Options	201	172	86
Achievement-Based Components	185	81	44
EOG/EOC	67	25	37
High School Comprehensive Test	59	10	17
Competency Gain	59	46	78

Figure 3. Distribution of Alternative School performance on various requirements of the ABCs

For the 1999-2000, school year alternative school performance was in some ways better than the regular schools. The fears of some alternative school principals were not realized in that the more extensive requirements for their participation in the ABCs did not reduce their chances at gaining recognition and incentive pay for their faculty.

Discussion

The results presented suggest that it is possible to construct an accountability paradigm for non-standard or alternative schools that will tap into their uniqueness and yet set an achievement standard as well. The mechanism for this was the requirement that alternative schools posit three local objectives which required them get buy-in from their local boards and identify which objectives they thought were important at the school level.

Critics of the local objective requirement contended that the schools would pick objectives that they could easily reach. While this is always a possibility the requirement that the local board and superintendent sign off on the objectives made this a less likely occurrence. Several schools in a major system did not achieve their local objectives and as a consequence did not receive any incentive awards.

Further information regarding Alternative Schools and Alternative Learning Programs in North Carolina is available on the NCDPI Web at the following addresses.

Alternative and Safe Schools/Instructional Support Section
http://www.ncpublicschools.org/school_improvement/altsafe.html

Updates on the ABCs Accountability Program

http://www.ncpublicschools.org/accountability/reporting/index.html#ABC

Alternative Learning Programs/Schools Directory, Evaluation, Best Practices, Suspended and Expelled Students, and More
http://www.ncpublicschools.org/accountability/evaluation/index.html